

# 1861-62 THE GREAT OVERLAND RACE

It was a day of triumph and of mourning, of celebration toasts and six black horses drawing a hearse through sombre streets of closed shops. On that day, 21 January 1863, the greatest exploration race in Australian history — crossing the continent from south to north—finally ended as Adelaide staged a heroes' welcome for the losers and Melbourne honoured the victors with a State funeral.

Although a transcontinental race was never officially declared, both Victoria and South Australia were determined to sponsor the first expedition to link their capitals with the distant north.

The first move was made in Melbourne by the Royal Society of Victoria which, in 1857, appointed an Exploration Committee to organise such a journey. Soon public subscriptions totalled £3000, while the Government provided £6000, as well as sufficient funds to purchase twenty-five camels for the expedition.

The committee chose an Irish policeman, Robert O'Hara Burke, to lead the fifteen-man team which finally set off from Melbourne on 20 August 1860.

Speed was of the essence, the committee chairman, Sir William Stawell, informed Burke just before he left, for already a determined Scot named John McDouall Stuart was preparing in Adelaide for a similar crossing. '... it will,' said Sir William, 'to a certain extent be a race between you and him.'

Born near Edinburgh on 7 December 1815, Stuart came to Australia when he was twenty-three. He worked as a survey draftsman with the South Australian Government for six years before joining Captain Charles Sturt's unsuccessful expedition to reach the geographical centre of Australia.

Although he revealed a remarkable aptitude for exploring, it was only in 1858 that Stuart led his own expedition on a 1600 kilometre march from Adelaide to Streaky Bay, for which the South Australian Government rewarded him with a land grant of some 400 hectares in the area he had explored.

The following April, Stuart and four companions travelled through unknown territory near Lake Eyre to the site of the present Oodnadatta, followed by a similar journey in October when he explored nearly 13 000 square kilometres.

By now the South Australian Government had offered a £2000 reward for the first person to cross the continent from Adelaide. So Stuart, sponsored by two landowners, William Finke and James Chambers, set off the following March with two men and thirteen horses.

Plagued by blindness in one eye, Stuart reached the geographical centre of

the continent on 23 April and planted the British flag on a nearby hill which he named Central Mount Sturt in honour of the leader of his first expedition — a name later changed to the present Central Mount Stuart.

The party travelled northwards for two more months before scurvy and hostile Aborigines forced a return south, where Stuart was awarded the Patron's Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society.

The Burke expedition, which had started from Melbourne in August 1860, then prompted the South Australian Government to offer Stuart £2500 towards the cost of a new attempt. He accepted, and on 11 January 1861, set off from near Lake Eyre with twelve companions and forty-nine horses. The great race had begun.

Burke, who at thirty-nine was a completely inexperienced explorer, soon ran into trouble with George James Landells, his second-in-command and the expedition's camel expert. Landells resigned and returned to Melbourne.

In his place Burke appointed a twenty-six-year-old English surveyor, William John Wills, and together with six other men, they set off in advance of the rest of the expedition, which they arranged to meet later at Cooper Creek.

But, once there, and very likely because of the earlier urging from Sir William Stawell, Burke decided not to wait for the vanguard but to make a dash for the Gulf of Carpentaria, taking with him Wills, John King, and Charles Gray.

William Brahe and the two other members of the advance party were to remain at Cooper Creek to await the arrival of the rest of the expedition under William Wright, whom Burke had hired *en route* as a guide.

The four men, with six camels and a horse, set off on 16 December 1860. Two months later they reached their goal, but swamps made it impossible for them to 'obtain a view of the open ocean, although we made every endeavour to do so'.

Travelling south again, the strain began to tell, and on 17 April, Gray died, only four days before Burke, Wills, and King reached the base camp at Cooper Creek. Here further disappointment awaited them, for Brahe had left only eight hours before because of illness among his men.

It was a bitter blow, as Wills noted in his journal:

*'Our disappointment at finding the depot deserted may easily be imagined; returning in an exhausted state, after four months of the severest travelling and privation, our legs almost paralyzed, so that each of us found it a most trying task only to walk a few yards...*

After a short rest they continued their journey, but in vain. By the end of June both Burke and Wills were dead. King, cared for by friendly Aborigines, was barely alive when a search party under Alfred Howitt eventually found him on 18 September.

News of Burke's success and the subsequent disaster reached Melbourne on 2 November 1861, creating a tremendous sensation. Declared the *Argus*:

*The name of RICHARD O'HARA BURKE is henceforth to be a precious possession of the people of Victoria. The glory of his deed, and the sorrow of his death, will render that name memorable in the annals of our country. And well may Victoria be proud of this, her first hero... this is a*

*victory in the highest sense, that BURKE and his fellow-heroes have won for us — a victory in the cause of knowledge and for the good of humanity — a victory that will live while Australia lasts, to her and our eternal glory.*

Such emotional outpourings prompted a call for a State funeral for the remains of the explorers. So Alfred Howitt was again dispatched, this time to recover the bones, which he brought back to Melbourne in January 1863.

Stuart, meanwhile, had reached the Centre on 7 April. But three months later, unable to find water, he was forced to turn back, reaching Adelaide on 21 September.

Again the South Australian Government and Chambers combined to equip another expedition, and this set off from Adelaide on 26 October 1861 — only a week before the sad fate of Burke and Wills became known.

This time Stuart, who now had a party of nine men and seventy-one horses, found waterholes to help him across the area north of the Newcastle Waters, where previously he had been forced to turn back. On 25 July 1862, near the present-day Darwin, the dogged explorer:

*... stopped the horses to clear a way while I advanced a few yards on to the beach and was gratified and delighted to behold the water of the Indian Ocean in Van Diemen's Gulf ... I dipped my feet and washed my face and hands in the sea, as I promised the late [South Australian] Governor Sir Richard MacDonnell I would do if I reached it.*

To commemorate the event, after a journey lasting one day short of nine months, the party hung a flag, bearing the explorer's name, on a nearby tree

and saluted the Queen.

On the return journey Stuart, already suffering from an eye infection and scurvy for some time, became seriously ill. He was carried south most of the way on a stretcher slung between two horses, before boarding a train at Kapunda, which brought him to Adelaide on 17 December 1862.

His ragged and emaciated companions joined him there midway through the following month.

On 21 January, as the remains of Burke and Wills were buried during a State funeral attended by 100 000 mourning Victorians, a jubilant Adelaide paid tribute to Stuart and his brave band.

Although Burke had been the first to lead an expedition across the continent, history has recognised Stuart's achievement as being the greater.

Burke and two companions died during their attempt; Stuart lost not a single man.

But his own health was broken, and he died, aged only fifty-one, in England on 4 June 1866. Six years later, the track he had blazed from waterhole to waterhole across the vast interior helped to link Australia by telegraph with the world.